

Supporting your child through Grief and Loss



Do children grieve in a similar way to adults?

- Both adults and children are likely to experience a range of feelings after the loss of someone special, including sadness, fear, anxiety, confusion, disbelief, guilt and anger.
- When children don't have the language skills to articulate their feelings they may express their grief through their behaviour.
- Exaggerated fears, clinginess, temper tantrums, stubbornness, and other regressions in behaviour can all be expressions of a child's grief.

How should I speak to my pre-schoolers about a family member's death?

- Pre-school children may see death as a temporary, reversible state. Let them know that the person's life is over now, and they will not be able to visit them anymore.
- Gently explain that the person's body doesn't work well enough for her/him to live in it, like s/he used to.
- Validate the sadness or other feelings your children express, encouraging them to come to you if they need a hug or a chance to talk about the person (or pet) they are missing.

What about older children?

- Provide school aged children with simple, concrete answers to their questions rather than complex scientific or philosophical explanations.
- Acknowledge feelings of confusion or uncertainty as normal when something happens that we don't want or understand.
- Children's library books on grief can be a great resource.
- Don't be alarmed if children's play includes scenarios of death as they process their grief.
- Make yourself available for hugs or chats when they are worried or uncertain.

What about adolescents?

- Allow young people to have their own experience, without expecting an "appropriate response." Adolescents' emotions are often complex, making it difficult for them to articulate their feelings well or on cue.
- Sharing some of your pain or sadness without embarrassment, will help them understand that grieving is a normal and healthy aspect of being human.

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My child's grief swings from anger that a loved one died, to a preoccupation with keeping our family safe from death.

- Children sometimes have a subconscious belief that they can avoid death, if they are clever enough. This can create uncertainty and lots of questioning.
- Rather than telling a child there is nothing to worry about, validate his/her anger that no one was able to keep the person they loved alive. Affirm his/her desire to keep those they love safe, gently explaining that even though people did everything they could, the person s/he loved had reached the end of their life.

Why does my child seem unmoved by a close family member's death?

- Grief can emerge over time, with a child's expression of emotion coming later as s/he starts to feel the impact of grief on her/his family, and life as s/he has known it.
- It can be confusing for a child to connect the little snippets of information s/he is receiving, and the dramatic changes in the mood in their home.
- Make space for the child to ask any questions s/he might have, reassuring her/him of your love, regardless of how much emotion is expressed or unexpressed.

My child didn't seem to take in what I was saying when I spoke to them about a the death of a family member.

- After a traumatic incident, it is difficult for anyone to retain and process information. This is particularly true for children when giving them information.
- Ask your child to repeat what has been said to check that there has been no harmful misinterpretation of content. For example, "Can you tell me what I said? Now do you understand what happened to Daddy/Grandma" etc?

My children have been misbehaving a lot since I lost my baby. I just can't seem to engage with them like I used to. Can you help?

- Acting out is a normal way for a child to react when s/he is feeling invisible or excluded. It is understandable that you are distracted by your own grief, but try to maintain some ongoing connection with each of them.
- Look for opportunities for one on one time, when it may be easier for them to share their feelings with you.